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*'White-faced lie'*

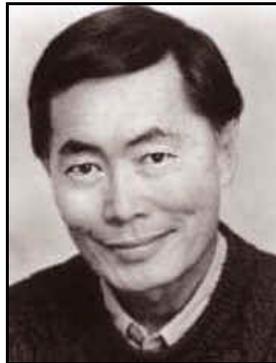
## Television and film star, George Takei, takes a stand

By Lisa A. Sillaway-Henshall  
Editor

George Takei is well-known for taking the helm of the original Starship Enterprise as Mr. Sulu. Recently, however, the actor and community activist is taking the helm of a different voyage – one designed to bring diversity to network television.

"TV is one of the most powerful mediums for shaping and forming public perceptions and it needs to play a leadership role," he said. "And it has been derelict."

Takei, 62, has joined forces with the NAACP, the National Asian Pacific Legal Consortium, the National Council of La Raza and American Indians in Film to pressure the networks into "colorizing" their fall schedules. The actor, who recently received the 1999 American Courage Award in recognition of the contributions he has made to America as a leader in the Asian-Pacific American community, calls the "blindingly white" casts of the 26 new fall network shows a "white-faced lie." Takei recently supported a petition titled, "[The Whitewashing of Network Television Must End.](#)" and a national "brownout" (Sept 12-25) to support culturally-diverse alternatives to the "white nation" currently portrayed on television.



Takei has twenty-seven feature films and hundreds of television guest-starring roles to his credit, but he is perhaps best known for his role as Mr. Sulu on the original 'Star Trek' series of the 1960s. What may be less widely-known is that Takei was born in Los Angeles, California, but with the onset of World War II, he and his family were placed into the barbed-wire enclosures of United States interment camps. Takei spent much of his childhood at Camp Rohwer in Arkansas and at Camp Tule Lake in northern California.

Today, Takei fills his days with acting, writing, long-distance running and activism. He took time from his busy schedule to share his thoughts on the new fall season of television shows.

### How did the two-week boycott work out? Did you actively participate?

Well, at this point I haven't seen an official report. But from what I can tell in the newspapers, the viewership seems to be below what it was last year during the opening week for the new shows. But, *[laughs]* don't ask me that much about the televisions shows themselves – I spent the week at friend's places and watching videos.

### We didn't hear very much about the boycott in the Midwest – it wasn't big news here.

Well, I think it was noted primarily in the media centers. But when the four top networks: NBC, CBS, ABC and FOX announced their slate of new programs for this fall – 26 new shows – we found that all the leads and all the actors were white. And this clearly is not representative of America today. It's an outright lie. We're clearly a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-cultural nation -- and the message that's being sent by that kind of programming is that we are a white nation. And this feeds directly into the delusions of white racists.

And, speaking exclusively from an Asian-American standpoint, no matter how many generations Asians have been here, we're still seen as extraordinarily-Americanized foreigners. It's been complimented frequently on how well I speak English, as if it

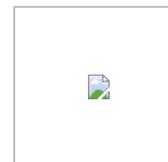
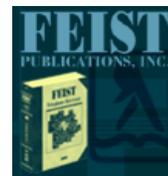
### Question of the Week????

"Have you made a donation to relief effort agencies during this disaster-filled (mudslides, quakes, hurricanes) fall?"

No  Yes

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foreigners. I've been complimented frequently on how well I speak English, as if it were an acquired language. So there's that perception, and when television paints this picture of America as a white nation it just underscores the 'otherness' of Asian Americans and all minorities.

My family and 120,000 other Japanese Americans -- because we had Japanese ancestry, with no charges and no trials -- were summarily rounded up and placed in barbed wire camps during World War II. Because we 'looked' like the enemy. So, the Asian-American community is particularly sensitive to this distortion of the reality of America. Other minorities -- whether you are Native American or African American -- you can find specifics with which to call to task that kind of programming.

[Minority groups] consistently call network executives to task for this [whitewashing]. We've been doing this since way back and every season they say: 'Well, next season we'll try to do better.' Well this season, finally, they have absolutely fallen flat on their faces.

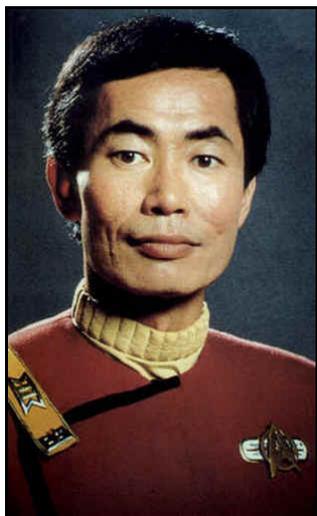
**Television shows are dependent on their advertisers to stay afloat. And there is the theory that these new shows simply reflect what America wants to see. What do you think about the theory that the networks are simply catering to the buyers and consumers?**

Whole idea of advertising is to sell products to the widest number of people, and the minority market is a multi-billion dollar market. So, it is stupidity or incompetence to want to sell to only one part of the market. The advertising argument falls flat on its face.

**Why do you think that this fall season is so completely white? What is your take on it this sudden lack of diversity?**

Well, I don't want to think it was all a nefarious plot. [Laughs] I also don't want to think it is ignorance or incompetence on their part --because I think [network executives] are very competent people and are very informed people. I'm really baffled as to a complete whitewash of this kind. I don't know *what* to put a finger on.

There is just no institutional memory in the business, they have such a great turnover. [Laughs again] There are children running the networks -- from my vantage point anyway -- which is more of a commentary about my age I suppose than on them! But there doesn't seem to be that institutional memory. I wish that their memory went back at least 33 years because in 1966 'Star Trek' premiered and we said that it was a visionary show then; but we didn't know -- we didn't realize *how* visionary. From the vantage point of 1999, we see that Gene Roddenberry used the Starship Enterprise as a metaphor for 'Starship Earth.' And the philosophy was that there was strength in our pluralism. To work in concert, to tap the best of our diversity, that is the way we are going to survive and prevail.



Gene Roddenberry was an ideal role model -- he was not wearing rose colored glasses. And he knew diversity has within it the potential for conflict. Here I was, an Asian man, Nichelle Nichols was on the bridge and she's an African

woman, and in the coldest of cold wars ... he put a character who spoke with a Russian accent on our bridge. He knew that without this diversity we would commit mutual suicide and that we needed to marshal our resources and move forward. He was an extraordinary visionary: look today at the Russian Space Station Mir and the upcoming international space station.

**Does it bother you to think that the work the cast did in the 60s might be undermined with this new crop of shows?**

I think it's awfully sad, because we are living in a time of great turmoil ... In the 60s, 'Star Trek' was, too. We had the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, flower-power and hippie movements ... But, now with hate crimes and the rise of white supremacy, gay bashing -- although we see more positive images of gays on television now -- well, TV is contributing to all that. Rather than the doing the opposite, being a leader and forging a more healthy and vibrant American society.

**On a more positive note: Are there shows and networks that are doing a good job with multi-ethnic and racial casting?**

I'm a little biased, but I think that 'Star Trek' is still doing that, with Star Trek Voyager. *[Laughs]*

There's 'NYPD Blue,' 'Law and Order,' those shows really reflect the diversity of America. And there is 'Martial Law' – which is more of a cartoon, I think, but still features minorities.

**What do you see as needing to be done. Many of these shows already have a good portion of their episodes in the can already. Can anything be done this year, in your opinion?**

Hopefully our speaking out will modify the blindingly-white look of some of these shows. But it is still cosmetic. It will be a cut-and-paste kind of approach and won't fix it. 'Star Trek,' again, I site as an example – that philosophy of the strength of our diversity was organic to the very concept of the show.

[www.georgetakei.com](http://www.georgetakei.com)

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*Photos courtesy Mr. Takei and georgetakei.com.*